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THE IMPLICATIONS OF STATEMENTS BY ABORIGINAL LEADERS FOR LANGUAGE TEACHING IN ABORIGINAL SCHOOLS

*B. Graham

In the Plenary Address to the Cross Cultural Issues in Educational Linguistics Conference held at Batchelor in 1987, Mandawuy Yunupingu, Principal at Yirrkala Community School, expressed the hope that a school using 'both-ways' curriculum would help Aboriginal people regain control of their lives. Among other things he states,

If you have control of both languages you have
double power.

(Yunupingu, 1987, p.4)

While many Aborigines have expressed concern about the role that Western-style schooling can play in the destruction of their culture (for example, Lanhupuy, 1985) some of these and others are beginning to express qualified support for this type of schooling. Wunungmurra (1988, p.69) states,

We [the Aborigines] cannot hold back change which
will happen whether we like it or not,

and goes on to conclude,

To live in both worlds we need to achieve a high
standard in education but to keep our own identity.

It is this important qualification of maintaining Aboriginal identity while enabling Aboriginal people to cope and interact with the Western cultural world that is the essence of bicultural education for Aborigines. The Longman Linguistics Dictionary entry for 'bicultural' is,

A person who knows the social habits, customs etc.,
of two different social groups can be described as
bicultural. (p.27)

and goes on to emphasize that it is not just the ability to speak a second language (bilingualism) but the ability to know how to

*Br B. Graham, Post Primary Boys Teacher, OLSH School, Wadeye, NT.

act appropriately in the context of another culture. Education is the process of imparting and acquiring the necessary knowledge and skills. The term 'both ways' education, or 'two ways' in the Arnhem area, are Aboriginal expressions for 'bicultural education'; but both sets of terms are interpreted differently by different groups of educators and different Aboriginal communities. Yunupingu's (1984) quotation is a case in point; it raises questions about:

- what is the school's role in language teaching?
- which languages will be taught?
- what kind of control over each language will be aimed at?
- to whom will this double power belong?

These are interlocking questions and cannot be dealt with discretely nor in strict sequence. However, it is proposed to use them as a framework to highlight some of the issues involved for language teaching.

There is a wide range of opinions on the role of the school in language teaching. Some see no place for Aboriginal language teaching/learning in the school. Such use of schools is "bullshit education" according to Charles Perkins (1990). He laments,

In many parts of the Northern Territory, they're wasting time teaching the kids in their own language at school. That is the responsibility of the tribe or family.

Poulsen (1988) agrees that the school should be there to teach English and Western knowledge only. His model has Aboriginal teachers teaching in and running the school; he implies that this will be sufficient to protect cultural identity. An 'English only' view would seem to be supported by many Aboriginal parents who send their children to boarding schools both interstate and in the Territory. The outstation model, for example the Hermannsburg schools (Schubert 1985), is based on this idea; the school provides instruction in reading, writing, maths and other Western knowledge, closely supervised by family elders. Traditional knowledge and vernacular language teaching is not part of the school.

Alternatively, there is another group of models which sees an important place in the school for vernacular languages.

Strelly in Western Australia (Bucknall, 1982) Yipirinya in Alice Springs (Harker & McConnochie, 1985) and most accredited bilingual schools, e.g., O.L.S.H. School, Wadeye, give heavy emphasis to teaching both the vernacular and English. These schools use the separate domains approach (which will be discussed in more detail later) to enhance Aboriginal language and cultural maintenance and at the same time pursue Western knowledge through English. Yirrkala (Wunungmurra, 1988) uses a bilingual approach but with less emphasis on domain separation, using instead a process of participatory research within the community to identify important, non-secret bodies of knowledge which can be the basis of school education and bridges to Western learning.

The question of 'which language will be taught?' is closely related to that of 'the role of the school'. For those who see the role of the school as exclusively for Western-knowledge gaining, this question is already answered. English only is the answer. And in the opinion of this writer it needs to be Standard Australian English; other dialects of English will not enable Aborigines to cope and interact with the dominant Australian society as adequately (if at all). If the school is to be bilingual, a number of problems arise. Standard Australian English, as mentioned above, needs to be taught/learned if the aim of adequate cross-cultural interaction is to be pursued. The vernacular language taught can be a problem. Some communities are composed of a number of language groups, e.g., Wadeye-Murrin-patha, Marringar, Murrinh-kura, Magitige, Marridjabin, Amu. Some uni-language groups have developed dialects to the extent that old people and children have great difficulty communicating, e.g., Tiwis on Bathurst Island. Aboriginal English has become the language of some communities and hence would be regarded as their vernacular. But what is its place in a school where it is not the vernacular? Hampton (1989) rightly decries the 'rubbishing' of Aboriginal English in schools; if you rubbish a person's language you rubbish him/her. That is not the function of a school. However, what Hampton does not make clear is the role of Aboriginal English in her community; is it vernacular, lingua franca or neither? If it is vernacular, then it has a place in the bilingual school. If it is lingua franca, its use in school runs the risk of impeding the development of S.A.E. necessary for appropriate interaction.

However, if F. Christie's (1985, p.29) view of language as, a resource with which we construct meaning and a symbolic system with which we make sense of the world

is accepted, the question arises as to whether Aboriginal English can be a vehicle for harmonizing two such disparate cultural systems as that of Aborigines and Westerners.

The distinct natures of the two cultures must be given close attention when developing curricula in a bicultural school. This is especially so for language curriculum, as language is one of the principal means of enculturation. Underpinning any culture is a world-view or

set of concepts which relate individuals within the culture to the natural universe and to other humans in their social reality.

(Christie, 1984, p.8)

Christie, quoting Bain (1979), describes how fundamentally different the Aboriginal world view is from that of Western civilisation. The world view of the West is described as 'transactional', in that the physical and social worlds of the group are seen as controllable through manipulation. The Aboriginal world view is described as 'interactional', in that survival depends on co-operation and co-existence in both physical and social worlds. These differing world views underpin not only language and education methods, but also spirituality, ritual, daily living patterns and power structures. Aboriginal law is a complex mixture of myth, principles of rights and responsibilities, precedent case-law and ritual knowledge and responsibility. Decisions about actions in relation to law are basically made by community discussion and consensus. Certain individuals may have authoritative status by virtue of one or a combination of factors such as family/clan position, knowledge or abilities, 'secret' knowledge, etc. No such status gives an individual the right to make binding decisions or interpretations. Such status, with the exception of responsibility for sacred sites, is not inheritable and must be earned in prescribed ways (based largely on Berndt & Berndt, 1977). Any language curriculum development that does not take account of Aboriginal world view, especially power sharing structures, and the likely effects of that curriculum on them, can hardly be said to be supportive of Aboriginal identity maintenance.

Having made decisions about what language(s) will be taught in the school, it will be necessary to look at the issue of what kind of language teaching/learning the school will follow and how this will relate to both maintaining Aboriginal culture and acquiring Western cultural knowledge.

As has been mentioned previously, the basic purpose of learning and using English is to allow Aborigines and their communities to cope with, interact with, and not be manipulated by the dominant Western culture. Proficiency in Standard Australian English is what is needed to attain that goal. Such proficiency will be necessary for at least some individuals in all four basic language skills, speaking, listening, reading and writing. As Martin (1987) states, Aborigines are keen to have their children taught 'secret English', that is, the 'literate' or 'essayist' style of language that is used by those with power in the dominant society, e.g., politicians, bureaucrats, technocrats, etc., and necessary for those who want to deal with such holders of power.

But there are difficulties in teaching this kind of language. Within the dominant society there is a wide range of success rates in teaching/learning such literacy skills, even though the learners are learning them within the context of their first language. Research (Scollon 1976, quoted in Cazden 1983, p.18; Painter 1985) indicates that special oral language structures, particularly the use of decontextualized language, and social support for such language, is necessary for success in attaining these skills. Those L1 speakers who do not have this, gain little literacy ability. Aboriginal L2 speakers of English are faced not only with the absence of such structures in their language learning environment (Jacobs 1987) but with a language (and a world view) that is orientated to a different purpose than that of English (Grey 1987). The attainment of highly developed literacy skills would seem to require Aborigines to adopt different thinking patterns and different purposes for using language. In this lies a threat to their cultural identity.

One suggestion to combat this threat while pursuing the twin goals of cultural maintenance and intercultural activity is the two domains approach. Christie (1986) and Harris (1988) argue that Aboriginal language and learning styles should be used for teaching/learning traditional knowledge and skills. However, such vehicles are not potent enough to attain the abstractly formulated Western knowledge. For this English and formal academic learning styles are necessary. Such a dichotomy, Harris believes will

involve retaining an Aboriginal world view;
doing, thinking and believing in Aboriginal ways

and

be successful in the higher levels of white culture.

(Harris 1988, p.76)

Such strategy is not universally accepted. McTaggart (1988) rejects the approach as theoretically and practically unsound. He rejects the approach as being a not-too-subtle attempt to continue the colonization/assimilation practices of previous times. He argues that Aboriginal communities should aim,

to co-opt what might be token Westernism in[to]
the service of community self-management and
renewal - the production and reproduction of
Aboriginal Australia for a new generation.

(McTaggart, 1988 p.87)

He maintains that a continuous system of participatory cross-cultural action research will provide the basis of appropriate curricula to achieve the dual goals of bicultural education.

He does not, however, appear to address the problems of gaining literary proficiency in a language as different as English.

The kind of vernacular language taught/learned in school raises similar problems. Many Aborigines reject Charles Perkins' evaluation of teaching the vernacular in school; they see the school as an important facet in maintaining their language either because there is already a degree of language breakdown because of other social problems in the community e.g. alcoholism, and/or they fear the potential of forces such as media and bureaucracy to replace vernacular with English. But much of the schools' efforts have centred on vernacular literacy, thereby hoping to both preserve the local language/culture and lay the basis for English literacy. According to Christie (1989) such efforts usually involve production of materials based on 'objectivity' and divorced from meaningful aspects of Aboriginal life such as, who the story teller was, the place, time and purpose of the story, how the producers of the story (including the literacy production team) were involved, etc. He argues that to support Aboriginal identity there must be,

a definite change in emphasis from simply learning
to read and write, to using literacy as one of the
adult tools in the ongoing process of Aboriginal
life.

(Christie 1989, p.31)

Such a scenario can be achieved by reversing the Western approach to literature so that

the book is not the beginning of an educational experience, it is the end; (through the) sharing, discussing, remembering, communicating and learning that went into it.

(Christie 1989, p.32)

Thus the questions of whether vernacular language teaching/ learning should be literacy based or not, and what kind of literacy, are posed.

All of the answers to the questions or options raised about 'which and what kind of language' will have implications for power holding and use. Harker (?) points out that Western style schooling is not only a vehicle for reproducing the society and culture of the group, it is also used as a means of social mobility. It encourages the individual to break away from and disparage any group and their culture that does not subscribe to the material and moral values of the 'white middle class'. The power that individuals, or groups, obtain through increased language and/or literacy abilities can be used to oppose and attack traditional power structures, beliefs and life styles - in a word, Aboriginal world view. The potential of the school, and the language education it provides, to do this must be recognised.

This discussion has mainly been concerned with problems, questions and options connected with language teaching in bi-cultural education in the Northern Territory. A subtle under-current to this discussion has been the issue of control. Decisions about language which have such deep implications for cultural identity cannot be made lightly. Ultimately the focus will have to become not what decisions are made but how they are made and by whom.

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The actions of the children are a constant source of amazement to the adults, like the time we decided after a Library visit to give them an early mark because it was raining. We were castigated severely by ALL of them and forced to return to school in the pouring rain for ten minutes of reading because their time was not up.

We recommend all communities to form a Study Centre in their local Primary School as the rewards are numerous, and we hope this report will inspire others.

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